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Horrors Of the Yellow Rain

Sterling Seagrave's Years-Long Struggle With an Asian Tragedy

By Henry Allen

The hospital — "*our* hospital," as Sterling Seagrave puts it, he being the seventh and possibly last generation of the Seagraves to be born in Burma — is in the northeastern part of the country. "It sits on mountains overlooking China. You can see snowcapped peaks in the distance. It's a huge thing, eight or 10 buildings the size of the White House."

The hospital has everything and nothing to do with the book Seagrave just published about chemical warfare — "Yellow Rain." The book details what he and our State Department believe to be the Soviet development of a substance called T2, which has been used by Soviets, he says, and by their surrogates, in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, China, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Seagrave quotes a Laotian tribesman in the book:

There was blood coming from their noses and ears and blisters appeared on their skin. Their skin was turning yellow. All the chickens, dogs and pigs were also dead. The people who were not dead were jerking like fish when you take them out of the water. Their skins were already yellow. Soon some of them turned black and they got blisters like the others. Blood came from their noses and they died.

Seagrave is the scion not only of seven generations of doctors and Baptist missionaries in Burma, but also of Gordon Seagrave, who became famous as the "Burma Surgeon." The father's death in 1965 was followed by the confiscation of his hospital by the Burmese government and by the ouster of the Seagrave family from their home of 150 years.

The son, on this cold night in Washington, wears a lightweight blue blazer. He sips soda water in a hotel bar. He seems chronically wary, as if he's certain he will at any moment remember that he has forgotten his car keys or left the water running.

"I'm vindicated," he says. "Local boy makes good."

He is 44, a dropout of the University of Miami, of Mexico, of Venezuela; a veteran of the Merchant Marine, and of two very bad days being beaten by Cuban policemen who suspected rightly that he was trying to join the then-guerrilla forces of Fidel Castro. He has held a lot of jobs in journalism, from The Washington Post to the Pittsburgh Press to 10 years of free-lancing. He traveled in a dugout canoe down the Mekong River, from the Chinese border to Vientiane, Laos. He lived for two years in Malaysia, a year in Thailand, all over Asia, except in Burma, where his father and family are buried. He was married to a Burmese. He is divorced. He spent years living with his two children on a 32-foot sailboat. He is rootless and homesick at the same time.

"Hell, we've got a 30- or 40-million-dollar plant in Burma," he says, referring to the hospital, always in the present tense. "My first memories are of fleeing the Japs to India. Anybody who grows up in the situation I did is permanently crippled."

This has something to do with his decision "to come back to the U.S. to go to ground. I got a job with Time-Life books here. But it was quiet. I needed something to do. One night I met this man who'd been searching for MIAs in Laos."

The man, whom he calls Schramm in the book, had come back from Laos with the femur of an American pilot and tales picked up from four French mercenaries about Hmong tribesmen being killed by airplanes dropping gas.

"Ypres," the Frenchmen had said, referring to poison gas attacks at Ypres during World War I.

Seagrave looked into it.

He traveled through Indochina collecting reports, as did American officials trying to find out what weapon it could be that would cause such deaths. He interviewed scientists and read biology texts. He studied the history of gas and germ warfare, all the horror and politicking that have resulted in all the labored and hopeless international covenants against it.

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